

CHANGING THE FACE OF CHARITY:- THE SPASTICS SOCIETY

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Charities are big business, and charities for disabled people are no exception. The Spastics Society, for example, has an annual income of £ 20m. It comes as no surprise to see that many such organisations are run by self-perpetuating committees and professionals for whom charities are all too often a career structure. The needs and wishes of the consumers, in this case people with Cerebral Palsy, come a poor third. This is evident in the recurring discussions within the Spastics Society over whether its name should be changed. The clinching argument in retaining the existing name is its money spinning qualities.

THE SPASTIC SOCIETY 'S CONFERENCE ON ANTI DISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION.

The Spastics Society relies on the perpetuation of images of disabled people as pathetic and dependent cripples for much of its income. Its policy has always been based on segregation; it has 15 residential homes, 10 residential hostels, 12 segregated schools, 9 segregated workshops and 3 segregated hotels. It seemed unlikely that given this track record that the Spastics Society in hosting such 'progressive' conferences were signalling a sudden change of policy or rushing to embrace the independent living movement. The most convincing explanation was that like many other charities for disabled people the Spastics Society was getting worried that disabled people were beginning to organise and challenge dependency creating and segregationist practices and the assumed 'natural right' of able-bodied do-gooders and experts to control disability organisations.

It seemed likely that the conference would turn out to be little more than hypocritical window-dressing, with the discussion of a safe progressive issue (legislation to prevent discrimination against disabled people), masking the oppressive nature of the sponsoring organisation. The first few regional conferences fulfilled the prediction and little seems to have come out of them.

It was with all this in mind that a group (provisionally called the Greater Manchester Independent Living Group) met to discuss whether to participate in the regional anti-discrimination conference to be held in Manchester on July 9th 1983. We took the decision that we were going to participate, but to make sure that Conference (especially the Workshops) discussed important issues. This was done by formulating a series of motions for each workshop, many quite radical and others which deliberately focussed on the policies of the Spastics Society.

On the day, all the prepared motions were fully discussed in each workshop. Other motions were added, but the only motion which did not get through in full was in the

Employment Workshop (which carried on arguing right through lunchtime) where the proposal calling for "an end to segregated workshops for disabled people" was defeated.

The set of motions below were passed by each workshop and then passed overwhelmingly by the conference as a whole :-

HOUSING

This conference believes that segregated residential institutions for disabled people be phased out. They should be replaced by appropriately designed houses with comprehensive and flexible support systems controlled by disabled people themselves. We call upon the Spastics Society to take the lead in implementing the above motion.

SERVICES

1. We call upon the Spastics Society to take a lead and promote active involvement of disabled people in the running of services both voluntary and statutory.
2. Services which enable people to live as normally as possible encouraging independent and not segregated living initiatives .
3. Joint action. by disabled people so that decision making and responsibility are made by disabled and able bodied people together.
- 4, Increased communication and information giving about what voluntary and statutory services can provide.
5. A breakdown in the barriers between local authority departments and health services.

ACCESS

This conference calls upon the government to pass EFFECTIVE legislation, together with an enforcing agency, to encourage councils to enforce the 1970 and 1981 Disabled Persons Acts, as fully as they enforce the Town and Country Planning Act.

The conference calls upon local councils to employ a full-time member of staff in their planning department to check all plans submitted, for access both to and within any building or premises, before such plans reach planning committee stage. This member of staff should liaise with local disabled access groups.

EDUCATION

This conference believes:

1. a) All F.E. and H.I. institutions should formulate and publish a statement of their intent, based on consultation with disabled students, acknowledging their responsibility to provide access, education and support for disabled students.
b) Each F.E. and H.E. institution should employ a disabled member of staff with special responsibility for disabled students, to provide support for them and to heighten the awareness of the college to the needs of disabled students.
2. This conference deplores the continuation of segregated education at all levels, and urges:
a).The government to provide the finances necessary to support disabled pupils in mainstream education,

- b) LEA 's and other independent schools to produce a policy statement in support of integration which incorporates a time-tabled programme for the transfer of resources from segregated to integrated forms of provision
- c) The Spastics Society to take an immediate lead by the phasing out of their own segregated educational institutions.

EMPLOYMENT

1. This conference agrees that discrimination exists in employment against disabled people and that legislation is required to make it illegal. ·
2. We call for an investigation into the various ways in which disabled people are exploited at work.
3. Programmes of positive action backed by legislation should be instituted as a means of equalising opportunities.

ATTITUDES

1. This conference calls upon organisations such as the Spastics Society which base their existence upon the perpetuation of images of disabled people as pathetic cripples, to cease the promotion of such negative attitudes by use of such images.
2. This conference deplores the perpetuation of discrimination by the Spastics Society against people who happen to have Cerebral Palsy and against women.
N.B. This refers to a collection box used by the Spastics Society which featured a woman who exposed a breast when a coin was placed in it. It was accompanied by the words 'Have fun giving to the Spastics Society'. Although officially withdrawn these boxes are still being discovered in pubs .
3. This conference wants positive legislation for disabled people.

TRANSPORT

1. This conference calls upon the GMPTC (Greater Manchester Public Transport Executive) to develop a public transport system which is fully accessible to all those disabled people with impaired mobility . This conference calls upon the GMC to accept the orange badge for access to pedestrianised areas and to abolish the discriminatory and divisive special permits.
3. This conference calls upon GMC to proceed with further pedestrianisation schemes only if they have been fully agreed by GM Highways and Disability Group and other relevant disabled consumer groups .
4. Dial a rides should be part of the public transport system.
5. End segregation in public transport.

What was surprising to those of us who had prepared the motions and expected a tough fight, was the overwhelming support they got in almost every workshop . Many individuals expressed feelings that they had been hoping for some concerted action by disabled people against such conferences and other such off-shoots of the IYDP.

COALITIONS

There was a determination not to let the results of this conference just fade away. Charities such as the Spastics Society are wealthy and influential, we cannot ignore their existence. Indeed it would seem likely that under the present government and its policies of privatisation, the charities will become more important, since they will control an increasing share of the declining resources for disabled people. As such, the power of these charities must be challenged and changed by disabled people.

The type of coalitions which can achieve such aims need to be developed. One danger is that 'independent living' can easily be used as an excuse for cutting existing institutional resources without transferring it elsewhere. The Spastics Society is quite happy to nod to the idea of independent living and point to the occasional 'progressive' housing scheme or the closure of a residential special school, whilst the true reasons often lay in cutting costs.

Another danger is that immediately you begin to talk of consumer control the professionals who make a career in the Personal Social Services, NHS or Charities become very jittery and defensive. Lucrative careers, fame and awards have been made on the backs of disabled people. One of their responses to this 'challenge from below' has been to push even harder for professional status and recognition - a route presently being taken by all the paramedical 'professions'.

But there are a few professionals who are prepared to take the more difficult course and support the struggles of disabled people for more control of resources and services. The Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People (DCODP) have shown how carefully considered alliances with radical professionals can be effective in developing imaginative schemes which are changing the direction of services away from segregation and imposed dependency towards independent living (1).

The message for professional groups therefore, as they come under increasing attack from disabled people is that they have a choice to consider. They can either become another entrenched body of oppressors like Doctors, or they can support our struggles to change the services that have caused so much misery and humiliation. How far we have to go can be assessed by comparing the conference motions with the present day reality of social welfare.

Note

For those interested in more information on the DCOOP Independent living Project and other schemes their address is; DCOOP, 17 High Street, Clay Cross, Derbyshire, England. (Stamp addressed envelopes would be appreciated.)

BERNARD LEACH
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Manchester July 1983